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Profile of Poverty in Prince Edward Island



PROFILE OF POVERTY IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Possibly here in Prince Edward Island one has perhaps the best opportunity afforded by any of our provinces to really examine and/or assess the problem of poverty regardless of just how it may be defined. For purposes of this very general paper let us assume simply that we are considering "need" of the individual or family and that this "need" may be income by way of cash or kind.

Here on "The Island" our isolation, overall network of access roads, our 107,000 people of whom a great majority have always lived here, the fact that we are still mainly dependent on our three basic industries of agriculture, fishing and tourism, our transportation problems and other factors not necessary to mention at this time, make our people a compact, accessible, stable group which is more or less a captive one and one which is small enough, representative of all classes, etc., and therefore, lends itself to comparatively easy study or survey.

As intimated then in the preceding paragraph our geographical location, our dependency on three basic industries and our, let us say, up to the present freedom from the influence of, for lack of better words, expanded industry as found in other and larger provinces, provide a situation where we can take a real, clear-cut look at people without having to move aside a lot of screening factors found in all other provinces of our great country.

In order to be as brief as possible with this paper I feel that now we should approach this problem of poverty or need considering the various factors which we feel enter into same and give brief explanations of what has been done in Prince Edward Island in regard to each and follow these up with suggestions as to what we feel might be done locally and perhaps with outside help to better conditions under each factor.

EMPLOYMENT

Whilst statistics show our average individual salaries to be the lowest of any province, we can say that there is practically no unemployment as such in Prince Edward Island other than the usual seasonal type of same. Of course, this does not mean that we have total employment - there are always some who just will not work and, of course, there are some who are just not able to take employment. The bulk of our seasonal unemployment is due to the fact many individuals have no trade or profession and are dependent upon seasonal labor which is becoming less and less from year to year due to automation, etc.

Here in this Province, municipal, provincial and federal governments have been doing everything possible particularly during the winter months to increase labour opportunities and through various agencies such as ARDA, Municipal Winter Works Incentive Program, projects of private enterprise, etc., considerable success has been achieved in providing employment where, in past years same was at a low ebb.

Our falling off in requests for unemployment assistance and other types of winter relief, etc., proves that these programs particularly in this Province have been very beneficial.

With these few remarks we pass on to our next factor, that of Education.

EDUCATION

Education is a field in which great strides have been made in this Province particularly during the last few years. Whilst we are more than happy with the provision of new schools, both elementary and the high school type, and whilst we are fortunate in having presently one university for the training of our young people with another one presently being planned, there is still much to be done in education in the general sense. We make this statement because of the fact still too many of our people have been dropping out of school at grade five or six level. This fact coupled with the additional fact that they have no trade or particular training of any other kind makes it difficult for them to pick up anything other than seasonal labouring work and while it is true these people can draw unemployment benefits in many cases during the winter months, this to us does not tend to do too much to completely cover need of the individual and family nor does it tend to build the better type of citizen we need in this Province and this Country in order to eventually eliminate poverty and make our Country strong. Education therefore, goes much further than academic and vocational training for which our provincial and federal governments have made excellent provision up to the present time. This education must somehow or other by various agencies, welfare and otherwise, be carried to the individuals and homes where we can see dependency on others including government has existed for generations. In other words, our records show that assistance has been given to grandparents and to fathers and mothers, and now certain individuals even in their younger and early married years immediately look to government or other agencies for help simply because their grandparents and parents received it before and they too feel it is their right and the way of life.

THE AGED

In Prince Edward Island we have doubtless due to our geographical situation and the type of old country stock which forms the base of our population, a considerable percentage of older folk. This fact is also probably due to several reasons, the chief one being that now that our educational system produces a fairly well qualified individual that a lot of our younger people are leaving the province to take up their duties elsewhere. I think it is generally known that one of our chief exports from Prince Edward Island is a type of enterprising young person we will find in all provinces and in all countries holding fairly responsible positions, etc. However, much as we like to see our young people get ahead in the world this does leave us with a considerable number of older people whom we feel it is safe to say dominate our economy and overall thinking at times in the province. I must say at this time we are indeed grateful to our older people or our senior citizens for all they have done to give us the facilities in which we live, work and enjoy life today and I am sure that they would be the first to agree with us that it is desirable for us to do more here in this province to keep our younger people at home and have them put their energy into development of Prince Edward Island.

Our senior citizens here in Prince Edward Island are gradually becoming more and more appreciated and efforts are now being made through governments, provincial, federal and civic, and also by private agencies to do more by way of providing facilities, financial assistance and recreation for these good people. Here in Prince Edward Island under the leadership of our provincial government, homes for aged people have been established, a Senior Citizens Housing Corporation has been set up which provides very comfortable living accommodation for elderly couples, etc., at reasonable rates and, as already mentioned, at least one Service Club has set up a recreation centre where the older people can get together and enjoy the comradeship which they so much desire. Much more can still be done by way of consideration for our senior citizens but a good start has been made and I am sure that every effort will be made in the future to make them aware that they are still a part of this province and country and that their personal needs are still uppermost in our thoughts.

FAMILY SIZE

Here in Prince Edward Island it would appear the average family size would be four people. However, as is the situation in every other province we do have families of considerably larger numbers and, of course, where noticeable poverty or need really exists this is found mainly in the larger families particularly when the children are younger and of no help financially, etc., to their parents.

Going further into the matter, of course, it also appears that heads of larger families as a rule do not have the education nor the trade qualification, etc., to enable them to command the larger income necessary to comfortably look after a larger group and it is in cases such as this where Family Allowances, Social Assistance and other types of aid have been and are of tremendous help. Now that the governments have established up-to-date technical schools, etc., a lot of these married men will be able to upgrade their education and so we hope command better financial income for their families. Of course, present educational facilities, etc., will perhaps not benefit the older or middle age group so much but they should do an awful lot in the future to improve the lot of individuals and family groups.

DISABILITY

As we are all aware, disabilities are two main categories, namely physical and mental and whilst an individual can carry on to a limited degree with a disability sometimes these are such that it just is not possible for him or her to be gainfully employed in any way. Here in Prince Edward Island we realize the necessity for an individual to be able to earn his or her livelihood if at all possible and so with coordination from the Department of Welfare and Labour we provided in conjunction with our good friends at the Department of Labour in Ottawa our Vocational Rehabilitation service. We found, however, that this cooperative effort was alright for adults that is, those eighteen years of age and over, but there was quite a gap existed in that there was no medical or surgical service, training or placement for those up to the eighteen year mark. Facing this problem we therefore, organized a Provincial Rehabilitation Council and now in order to do a better job in making people fit to the maximum amount possible we immediately after the birth of a child do everything possible to remedy any handicaps he or she may have been born under, etc. We find that this early help to individuals is paying off and that instead of having a lot of young people coming to us in future years with hairlips, cleft palates, congenital heart conditions, etc., that a lot of these conditions are being remedied and giving us a lot of capable people who would have previously been handicapped. Under our Vocational Rehabilitation Agreement with Ottawa and in cooperation with various agencies in the province we are today giving many individuals medical and surgical treatment, training or re-training of various kinds to fit them for various jobs and in conjunction with National Employment Service we are actually placing goodly numbers in gainful employment. Of course, Disabled Persons' Allowances are paid presently to those who are totally and permanently disabled and over eighteen years of age but this is simply a last resort and we feel that everything possible should be done to utilize at least any abilities which might remain in our disabled people.

I am sure that you will all agree that anything we can do to make these individuals feel that they are part of the community and are at least partially self-supporting will be helpful not only to them but to the community as a whole.

HEALTH

I am sure that all will agree that poor health is one of the chief causes of need or poverty not only in Canada or this Province but throughout the world. Every effort is being made through our provincial and civic governments here in Prince Edward Island to educate their people in the need of good health and, of course, facilities have been created particularly by the provincial government and private organizations to provide the best of modern facilities for the treatment of illnesses of various kinds, etc. Great strides have been made to control tuberculosis, our polio victims in this province have been helped terrifically, a great amount of work is being done to help those with mental health problems and our general hospitals are doing a wonderful job in providing the best of facilities for those needing that type of help. Our Public Health Nursing staff and others of the Health Department are doing a wonderful job in improving health standards throughout the province and we are sure that in the future their efforts will more than pay off and be most helpful in combating poverty.

HOUSING

Whilst a goodly number of homes in this province are now getting a bit old and run down, the majority of homes, particularly the newer ones, are particularly attractive, well kept and provide good comfortable accommodation. Housing for the older folk up to two or three years ago was a problem and they were forced pretty well to live with their boys and girls who had married, etc., or in many cases rent rooms or board in crowded accommodation. Now, however, through the provision of homes by the government for those who are not in position to look after themselves and our Senior Citizens Housing accommodation in the form of self contained little apartments, etc., this phase of housing is being met fairly well. Low cost housing however, for families and younger married couples is still a problem and at present this type of accommodation is really non-existent. However, we are pleased to say that municipal and provincial governments with the cooperation of the federal government are now facing up to this problem and it is expected that within a short time this type of accommodation will become available and will certainly be a terrific boost in cutting down need or poverty among the younger people and families.

ATTITUDES

On the whole the attitudes of our citizens and various communities about the province are good. However, there is, as already mentioned before, a certain number of citizens who through lack of education and motivation are content to go along with the tide so to speak and are contented to let others do their worrying for them and feel that they have the right to receive assistance from government and other organizations. They are contented to live in out of the way places, do little, if anything, and as mentioned exist on pittances from government and other organizations. These people, of course, are in many cases living as their fathers and mothers did before them and will go on to live in this way unless we take steps to encourage them to get out of their present surroundings and help them do so along with providing them with opportunities to make a respectable living and see just what they have been missing by previously refusing to get out and do something constructive to help themselves.

COMMUNITY FACTORS

As intimated in the preceding paragraph not only the attitude of individuals but the opportunities and attitude of communities are of terrific influence in the matter of need or poverty. If communities are progressive and provide plenty of work opportunities we find a fairly healthy prosperous district or area. If, on the other hand, communities lack good leadership, progressive government, etc., we can certainly be prepared to find dissatisfaction, a pitiful situation in general and, of course, actual poverty. Here in Prince Edward Island every effort is being made by governments and individual enterprise to provide good leadership and opportunity for our people. While we realize that there will always be some who will need help we feel that the majority can certainly look after themselves and with the encouragement of government and others to create the proper attitude and restore pride of the individual in himself in his community, etc., we will go a long way toward eliminating need or poverty.

In conclusion I would like to say that I feel the Late President Kennedy had something when he made the statement to this effect "Let us not ask what my country can do for us, but what we can do for our country. If we can absorb this spirit in our province and in this great country of ours, stop pampering a lot of our individuals and assist them in getting down to honest work again as our forefathers did, then I feel we will be able to say we have full employment and practically no poverty.

